Till We All Gone; How Life Is

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Abstract

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The greater Baton Rouge, La. area is one of the richest and most soulful wells of rap talent in the country and a bastion of local hip-hop infrastructure in the South. Bootleg CD salesmen stand outside seafood shacks hawking the newest mixtapes by rising local stars, 16-year-old artists become parish-wide sensations within a matter of months, and strip clubs rule the night with music from surrounding neighborhoods.

Inspired to carry the spirit of Alan Lomax's pioneering folk song recording expeditions into the present-day, I chronicled the vibrant scene in Baton Rouge proper and its rural hinterlands -- small towns like Clinton, Jackson, and Saint Gabriel, where tightly-knit groups of artists make music in relative isolation. I tried to provide an intimate but far-reaching view of a long-ignored culture that possesses an astounding vitality and a sense of social urgency.

The result was two-fold: a sweeping photo essay ("How Life Is") covering numerous locations in and around Baton Rouge, and a film ("Till We All Gone") honing in on the town of Clinton (population: 1,653) and a small group of rural romanticists there.

Many of the rappers I met who show up in the photo essay and film view their art as their main vessel to honestly express themselves and process their day-to-day reality. There is a strong emphasis on using raps to tell the truth in an autobiographical sense. A mix CD will be flecked with blues cadences, mournful dirges, and transcendent club anthems. An unusual emotional range emerges, encapsulating love, loss, and the space in between.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my deep gratitude to anyone who participated in the filming and photographing of this project by inviting me into your life and sharing your story. There are literally hundreds of you across the South who gave me your time and energy. Many of you I sadly was not able to include in the final works, but I absolutely could not have done this without the consistently heart-warming displays of generosity I encountered everywhere I went in the South, and I'll always remember that and carry it with me.

Many thanks to my advisers, Don Howard and Eli Reed. I have immense respect for your work and it was a special experience to be able to have so many dialogues with you about this project and learn from your experiences.

Love to all my family. You all's support and enthusiasm mean so much, and many of the people I met while working on this project only underscored how incredibly lucky I am to have such love and support behind me in my endeavors.

Thank you to Asa Merritt. I remember sitting in a coffee shop with you in Austin in November 2015 and for the first time telling someone about this vision at length. Your encouragement from the get-go was invaluable. And your consistent investment in this, from proof-reading grant applications to coming along for two legs of the project and showing patience as I figured out how to bring this to life, makes me indebted to you. You helped me realize this dream and come into my own.

My sincere appreciation to the University of Texas and Plan II, both of which provided critical financial support through grants and gave me a rare opportunity as a young journalist to pursue a project of this nature. My travels humbled me, taught me things I truly will remember for the rest of my life, and changed me as a person.

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v. Treatise

The azaleas in East Feliciana Parish bloom bright pink the week before Mardi Gras, when the sultry heat of Louisiana begins to return but nights are still cool and the wind feels like it kisses your skin. Here in this area, about 100 miles from New Orleans and 30 or so miles north of Baton Rouge, the smooth gulf plains begin to ripple into wooded hills, which are populated with pristine cow pastures, nameless gravel roads, and many, many Baptist churches. Ruins from the antebellum period, when this place had one of the largest concentrations of slaves in Louisiana, are dotted around. Cajun country -- aka Acadiana, land settled by exiled Francophones from Eastern Canada -- starts on the other side of the Mississippi River. This territory is older, more distinctly Southern in feel, embattled but beautiful. Named after a Spanish governor's wife, "Feliciana" means "happy land."

Clinton is the seat of East Feliciana Parish, located close to its geographic center. Nobody in the town really seems to know how many people live in it -- I heard everything from 2,000 to the outrageously inflated number 15,000 -- but the 2010 census reports 1,653. I travelled there several times for my thesis, taking my last trip in late February 2017, when the land was decorated by those bright pink azalea bushes. Clinton would look, to some, like not a lot: another sleepy Southern town with a handful of local restaurants, a Dollar General, and a pleasant town square. But deeply inspired by its land and the people there, I chose East Feliciana -- and Clinton in particular -- to form the crux of my thesis, a documentary film called "Till We All Gone" about the area's hip-hop scene abetted by a photo essay ("How Life Is") encapsulating the greater Baton Rouge area.

Clinton is tiny, yes, and that was part of the draw. It may have the greatest rappers-per-capita ratio I encountered anywhere during a journey that took me across the South and then

deep into Louisiana as I was searching for the heart of contemporary Southern rap. In Clinton I found an extraordinary sense of spirit and a story that I had been searching for without knowing its entirety: a coterie of rural rappers, in close dialogue with one another, making music about romance, heartbreak, country living, and what it means to be black in the South in 2017 while raising questions about the social context of art, the nature of dreams, creative influence in the age of the Internet, and the value of music to disadvantaged communities. It is the type of hyperlocal music scene that I set out to find when I began conceptualizing this project around a year and a half ago. Its raw, diaristic form evokes a present-day descendent of the blues: heartfelt, melancholy music that just seems to exist -- away from the pretense of major cities and established scenes -- and bleed out of the people. Rap saturates the circles of young people there, and is a way for simply chronicling, in the words of one man I met, "how life is" (thus titling my photo work).

The project's leading purpose was to explore rap music's role in the South today. How does rap relate to the lives of its creators, especially marginalized ones? What significance does rap hold in local communities? These questions are especially relevant today because of the renewed discussion over civil and human rights and, on the music side, talk that local rap scenes no longer exist. What is gained through these local scenes, and why do they exist where they do? What is at stake if they are lost? Clinton helps answer some of these questions.

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It is important to first understand Clinton in terms of Louisiana as a whole. The state is one the richest and most soulful wells of rap talent in the country, evoking a bygone golden age of local Southern hip-hop while speaking profoundly about the South today. In Baton Rouge, the

state's capital and creative furnace, bootleg CD salesmen stand outside seafood shacks and hawk the newest mixtapes by rising local stars, 16-year-olds become city-wide sensations within a matter of months, and strip clubs rule the night with music from the immediate area. This musicality extends outward, curling along rural state highways and through dense bayous, moving into tiny towns like Clinton, and cultivating new generations of musical storytellers in the storied cradle of many of America's great musical forms.

The broader narrative of rap in the state starts in earnest with pioneering New Orleans record labels like No Limit and Cash Money, which kickstarted Louisiana hip-hop in the mid- to late-1990s. A reaction against both the commercial and creative tenets of rap from the East and West, they adopted an independent, grassroots approach to business (selling tapes and CDs out of the trunk, touring the present-day version of the "chitlin" circuit composed of strip clubs and other night spots in small Southern towns) while developing their own musical and lyrical vocabulary rich in Southern heritage -- the slang, lilt, and instrumentation. Their music, which included classic albums by Juvenile, Mia X, Mystikal, Soulja Slim, Baton Rouge's Young Bleed, the Hot Boys, and No Limit figurehead Master P, saturated the region and sold en masse; it was also a thematic counterpoint to the East and West, and it faced at-times harsh prejudice from people outside the area as a result. (For example, Cash Money invented the phrase "bling bling," and quickly became synonymous in the eyes of East Coast purists with vapid materialism.) But I believe these criticisms were irrational. Louisiana rap of that era prized technical skill and innovation, but also the idea of the anthemic and hard-boiled "struggle" narrative about living in -- and making it out of -- poverty in a state with the country's highest murder rate. It also produced some of the all-time great party rap songs. In other words, it was aggressively, viscerally real music that still never forgot how to have fun, a complaint commonly levied

against New York rap, which in its stagnation became overly preoccupied with sheer rhyme talent at the expense of soulfulness.

Most importantly, these early years planted the seeds for an ongoing music cottage industry across the state. The No Limit and Cash Money wave -- No Limit reached its commercial and creative peak in the late '90s, and Cash Money entered a period of relative dormancy after the year 2000 that was then interrupted by the success of Lil' Wayne -- gave way to a new generation of rappers in Baton Rouge, which thrived musically after Hurricane Katrina hollowed out New Orleans. Baton Rouge absorbed many of its southern neighbors and became the new center of gravity in the state for underground hip-hop. Boosie Badazz (fka Lil Boosie), who is from South Baton Rouge, began recording at age 14, but really hit his stride in the mid-2000s. Alongside his rhyme partner Webbie, Boosie immortalized himself in the city's memory, helped by an endorsement from Houston's Pimp C and his label Trill Entertainment. Rock-hard but emotionally raw, street-savvy but club-minded, Boosie and Webbie struck upon a formula that many of the area's young rappers today continue to abide by, building upon the street narratives and "turn-up" qualities of earlier No Limit and Cash Money music. The sound -- constructed by Baton Rouge natives like Mouse on the Track -- was full of rolling tom drums, horns, punchy basslines, and quick tempos, adopted, again, largely from the Cash Money architect Mannie Fresh.

The inertia and energy behind Boosie and Webbie -- the sense that the city had anointed these men, that they spoke for the people, which I suspect is a large reason why hip-hop has such a profound presence in the city -- has evidently continued. (A favorite line from Webbie's associate Big Head in his song "Politician Networkin": "I know the streets love me because they told me so / I asked God to forgive me but he told me no.") Hip-hop is deeply embedded in

Baton Rouge's bloodstream, and it is a self-sustaining institution, feeding off its own momentum and the structures it has built for itself. The music has continued to morph in incestuous fashion, emphasizing its distinctiveness and stylistic boundaries. Visiting there, it is something of a reminder of what could be lost if the Internet ever takes true precedence over local scenes, and how some of the most beautiful, impassioned art comes out of the worst circumstances. It is also a reminder of the creative power afforded when your audience really and truly identifies with what you are making; it creates an almost spiritual bond between artist and listener.

Artists in Clinton exist in this sphere, taking inspiration from the city and the finely wrought musical history of the area but molding it to fit their own lived experience. Rap in Louisiana has a particularly pronounced emphasis on "realness," and Clinton embodies this. Rappers there told me they rap about what they know. "I'd be like, 'Why is you lying in your raps?'" Kenneth Washington, aka Headhonchok, told me when I asked him why fantasy is unacceptable. Cleezy Cain, another Clinton artist, told me that "I like to hear the real music. I don't like to hear people rap about stuff [that they don't do]. I want to hear really what they've been doing, and what they've been going through. That's the kind of stuff I be on." In contrast to Baton Rouge, with its harder-edged, more violent narratives, in Clinton they feel most deeply about lost loves, foibles among friends, and the departure of friends and relatives. Their music reflects this. Some Clinton artists veer into the more hardened street tales of Baton Rouge, but this comes with some degree of posturing. Most of them say that they have lived their lives in relative quietude, but nevertheless in a state of pronounced poverty and government neglect, where rap, in the words of local artist WTB Juice, emerges as "every nigga's hood dream," both an outlet for frustration and a source of opportunity in an otherwise barren land. Says Cleezy

Cain: “In Clinton we don’t have a lot of opportunity. There isn’t a recreation center or anything like that. So we’re just all trying to rap, to stay on that same page. Express our minds.”

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Because it’s so important to Baton Rouge and Louisiana writ large, rap is an excellent lens for looking at the area as a whole -- the violence, neglect, and deep poverty facing many local communities, both in Baton Rouge and outside of it. (As previously mentioned, Louisiana has the highest murder rate of any state, and nearly 25% of the population in rural areas lives below the poverty line. The USDA has designated 32 of the 35 rural parishes in the state as “black high poverty parishes,” meaning more than half of the poor population is black.) As just mentioned, many rap artists, who often come from embattled neighborhoods and dream of using music to get out, blend art and autobiography. What does it look like and feel like to be a young black man in the South in 2017? You can start by hearing it -- the poignant mixture of bloodletting and affirmative anthems -- and move in from there. Police brutality, friends killed in shootings, a good night on the block: it is all fair game if it can be rapped on top of the right instrumental.

I firmly believe in the potential of using music as a way to tell substantive stories about society in this fashion. This project, then, is partly in reaction to the American music media, which focuses on celebritization and rarely covers artists without hype -- as a result, we miss stories that have a sort of pure human value to them. Ultimately I hope it will encourage people to treat hip-hop as a serious art form capable of poignant and relevant commentary on contemporary class and race issues. More broadly speaking, I hope it will spur more people to acknowledge the divisions and poverty within the United States that I feel are often ignored and

absent from policy discussions. We are also going through a critical period of self-reflection in regards to race relations in the US and I hope this will contribute to that dialogue.

I do not believe my humble project necessarily accomplishes any of this, or provides answers to any of these questions; it was not my intent to solve anything. There are far more direct ways to address and mend these issues. But I believe documentaries have the ability to engross people and trigger their compassion, and that is one reason why I chose this form, to serve as an investigation and subjective chronology of impressions and images of reality for people to consider. I thought there was a lot of untapped poetry in Southern hip-hop, and I thought that could be shared to help people empathize and create bridges.

Furthermore, I want to just share the vibrancy and spirit that still exists in these communities. If there is one moment that summarizes this, it was when I was standing with two rappers -- Yung Ambition and Rudy -- by a moonlit pond in the countryside, each of them staring across the water and trading off short verses about heartbreak. They both landed on a song they had written together and began harmonizing: “These people crazy / Tell me why the cops on us / I’m gonna keep praying to God because in God I trust / Man they ask me for ID but they quick to bust / Wearing black, see, the cops? They stay clutch / And I was born and raised in America / And God freed the slaves in America / Tell me why these people really scared of us / Man they trying to take us out America / It’s hard to live / When your skin black / Man these cops in the streets don’t know how to act / You ain’t gotta run they can still shoot your back / And when you dead you ain’t never get no justice back / And that’s just how it go.”

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In mid-20th century, a University of Texas alumnus named Alan Lomax embarked on a series of pioneering song-collecting expeditions through the American South to document and

preserve the idiom of the blues. Discovering and sharing the music of then-unknown artists like Muddy Waters, Son House, Fred McDowell, Blind Sid Hemphill, Big Bill Broonzy, and on and on, Lomax changed the course of popular music and, treating the music as a serious art and form of cultural expression, drew lines back to traditional African music and the haunted history of the South. Although he literally travelled around the world recording various forms of folk music, he remarked at the end of his career that the music of the South remained, in his mind, the crown jewel of his travels. (Although there may have been some bias: Lomax was born in Austin and attended UT, and if this project has taught me anything, it is that we can identify the most with music that comes from our land and people; it is sacred in that way.)

Last year, inspired in part by Lomax, I began making similar trips, which led to the film and my time in Clinton. I want to briefly tell this story so people can understand where I am coming from. Like Lomax, I was primarily concerned by what was happening at that exact moment, not necessarily building a history of the past, which led me deep into the contemporary hip-hop world. There is valuable work to be done in the field of hip-hop history, but many scholars over the last decade (for example, Holly Hobbs in New Orleans, who has recorded an exhaustive collection of oral histories with local figures, or Lance Scott Walker in Houston with his books *Houston Rap* and *Houston Rap Tapes*) have helped fill that void, and I wanted to avoid repeating someone else's work. Furthermore, I saw more room to explore interesting creative forms if I could just focus on the "now."

I visited Dallas; Houston; Baton Rouge; New Orleans; Jackson, Ms.; and Huntsville, Al. on my first trips. During this initial boots-on-the-ground reporting I encountered what I believe is the full spectrum of the modern rap industry: creative genesis, the writing process, producing beats, recording in studios, selling the music on the streets, shooting music videos to promote it,

playing the record in clubs (sometimes strip clubs), performing around town, trying to find a home among major record labels from one of the coasts, the role of radio.

In the end I decided to focus on Clinton in part because of the complexity inherent in documenting a much larger area like Baton Rouge, let alone the South as a whole. I spent extensive time (actually, probably twice as long as I spent in Clinton) filming in Baton Rouge as well, but for the sake of concision focused on Clinton. I am embarrassed now that I thought I could even begin to make a representative piece about the region; I still think trying to make a film about Clinton, with its knotted layers of history and my social remove, is an act of hubris. But then again, so is any documentary film.

I spent a lot of time with this project, especially during those long drives to Louisiana, thinking, "Why me? Why I am the one to do this project?" As a journalist, I think that is always an important question to ask. Ultimately I pressed forward because to my knowledge no one else was doing anything like it and I felt an ongoing passion and earnest belief in the power of the story. As a white man, my perspective was limited, and I tried to mind this to the best of my ability and, most of all, treat everyone with the respect and dignity they deserved, which was not hard -- I met some of the kindest, most inspiring people I have ever met on these trips. I tried to create good vibes wherever I went, to be as open as possible about the project and my intentions, and I think people responded to that and reciprocated. When I show people the project, they almost always ask about how I got along with my subjects. I reply that rarely ever did I have what I would describe as an unpleasant interaction with anyone I met. My heart was constantly warmed by the generosity and openness of the hundreds of people I spoke with while making the project, who really took me in and made an effort to help me understand their way of life, and I am forever grateful to them for that and will carry that memory and spirit with me wherever I go.

To help frame my work, I also studied the ethical perspectives of documentary photojournalists in the past and their philosophies for doing work about the disadvantaged, and kept in my heart the idea that I was there because I respected these people and just wanted to tell their story to the broader public. I also kept a copy of Aristotle's *Ethics* in the backseat of my van, and felt informed by some basic principles of how humans should relate. The last thing I wanted it to be was voyeuristic. One rapper in Saint Gabriel, La., Beezy Bee, said something to me that I found particularly affecting: "You never know what a person is thinking or how a person think. Everybody got a story to tell." As part of my philosophy, I tried to ask what stories people had to tell, and to make real, human connections wherever I went. This not only meant I had more access than I could have ever imagined, but I think it increased the authenticity and sincerity of the project.

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The style of the film is a summation of many influences, namely Alex Webb's black-and-white photography work in Mound Bayou, Ms.; Khalik Allah's *Field Niggas* (2015), a hallucinatorily beautiful documentary that builds itself around video portraits of people on a Harlem street corner and asks them, as one human to another, about their thoughts and politics with empathy and understanding; documentaries by the music ethnographer Les Blank, who worked extensively in Louisiana documenting small town music culture and shunned cut-and-dry narratives in favor of impressionistic tableaus of scenes and moments in the space; the editing and metaphysical narratives of Terrence Malick movies; and *God's Country* (1985) by the Frenchman Louis Malle, which is about a small town in the Midwest approached by Malle with tenderness and ever-present curiosity about the way things work and function, and how the people live. I could go on-and-on: D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967) was another

stylistic touchstone for its wonderful black-and-white look and the way it seems to worm under the significance of any situation, and *Chronique d'un été* (1961) is as good a place as any to begin understanding how people react to a camera and the machinations of documentaries. Richard Brody's book on the working life of the French filmmaker Jean Luc-Godard, *Everything is Cinema*, also continuously inspired because of the way Godard viewed moviemaking as a way to capture life in a profoundly autobiographical capacity, and his belief cinematic form was meant to be bent and broken as a means of expression.

Finally, although I did not watch the film until relatively late in the creative process, Dziga Vertov's seminal 1927 experimental documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* resembles my end result in some ways and embodies several of the thoughts I had while editing the film. Vertov believed in a modular approach to filmmaking, where each frame was seen as a unit and disparate sequences could be precisely arranged and timed to build a web of disconnected associations, impressions, and abstract points about time and motion. Vignettes merge together and enhance one another, gradually mapping out a series of feelings and ideas. No points are crammed down your throat. It is a diffuse but balled-up form of expression: like a poem.

Working off of some of these references, "Till We All Gone" became something of a fragmentary, Southern gothic daydream, more of a visual poem about Clinton than a concrete point A-to-point-B narrative. I wanted to produce something that felt raw, visceral, and stylistically impressionistic, which I felt befitted the elegiac quality of the music and would be entirely different from the way many other films treated this subject. (Even now, looking at the list of influences, I think it would be hard to find something that occupies that same territory.) I have nothing against so-called "talking head" documentaries, but I wanted to make something that felt true to me and carried my original vision through. I was deeply stirred by the people I

met and their stories, and wanted to try to convey the little moments of epiphany that emerged when I was, say, standing by the pond as the rappers freestyled on the dock, or rolling in the bed of a pick-up through the countryside across from Headhonchok -- in Baywood, what he termed "the home of slums" -- as he clutched two small pistols and plaintively smoked a blunt.

Befitting for an ostensible music documentary, I viewed editing as a form of music in itself, which is meant to strike a particular rhythm, balance, and sense of harmony. I tried to harness this feeling and follow impulse, looking for abstract links among the bits and pieces I had assembled and using natural sound as a kind of instrument in itself (the Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer had a memorable line: "real sounds are more effective"). Thus music enters the frame solely through the world itself; it is never imposed on top of the existing reality.

While filming, certain scenes caught my attention because of their storytelling import -- their ability to encapsulate a complicated idea in a matter of seconds, which is part of the magic of life as it can be captured by documentary film. This is the equivalent to the journalist seeking that one soundbite that really summarizes what could be several hundred words in a laconic, impactful sentence. Other scenes I captured simply because they provided the kind of concrete visual linkage and coverage of a scene that we are used to in documentaries, providing a traditional and comfortable sense of space and time (for example, the exteriors of buildings). Other images caught my eye because of something primordial, epic, or seldom seen about them: the burning tree in the yard, the young boy standing next to his pony outside, the bayou, the Rosedown plantation about 30 miles west of Clinton. These I became interested in because of their metaphorical potential or uncanny quality. They helped achieve the proper tone. I chose black-and-white for the same reason; it seemed to tease out the meaning I was trying to achieve, and it also rooted the documentary in my origins as a black-and-white photographer.

It is my hope that I do not come off like an aesthete in light of these remarks. Part of the reason I am grateful to have received a journalism education was that it encouraged me to consider the ethical implications of how we work, especially in visual modes of communication, where the lines between art and reporting begin to waver in an at times unsettling fashion. People are not merely images. I dealt with real humans who lived in often very tough circumstances, abandoned by their families. Many have been tragically denied opportunity -- and might remain so if our country fails to acknowledge the need for better social safety nets and to address the abject levels of rural poverty, which paradoxically helped elect Donald Trump, a man who will likely do nothing to help many of these kind and ambitious people I met. I feel an acute frustration now at anyone who may blithely mock the content of the music without understanding the circumstances from which it arises. Rather than meet it on its own terms, they judge it with their own privileged cultural values and I want to repel that way of thinking by linking art and its context.

Of course, I say this all as an outsider from a top-shelf honors program at a public university who funded the film with (albeit an extremely low budget by the standards of the film industry) several thousand dollars of grant money. I recognize the ivory tower emerging here. This is inherently problematic, but again, I tried to keep my purpose and the purity of the approach intact, living almost monastically for a period of time by sleeping in a van in various truck stop casino parking lots, eating a small bowl of parfait for breakfast most mornings as I backed up the previous days footage on my laptop, following up with various contacts on my Blackberry through calls or texts or Instagram, and then immersing myself as fully as possible in this world I had discovered for the rest of the day, spending the rest of my time driving about and daydreaming while listening to Ella Fitzgerald cassette tapes. If I did not have anything

scheduled, I would simply begin bending around streets and trying to find people or moments that caught my eye, hopping out of my car whenever I did -- an approach that frequently reaped rewards. I slowly fell in love with the area and this guerilla mode of working, and by really being present there, I found a closeness to my work that would never have been possible had I set about analyzing secondary research. There is tremendous value in going to see a place for yourself and spending real time there.

In the end, I think that my approach is arguably more befitting than an exacting model that seeks to explain. This is a major reason why the film did not use narration. While a narration track would have perhaps been able to stamp a point on the film or frame its purpose in more precise terms, I felt awry about trying to insert myself in that fashion. It did not feel right and so I stuck with my gut. I just wanted people to feel something, to get glimpses into a new place, and to have enough room to imagine their own world and narrative arc within the abstraction.

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I wonder a lot about what will become of the people I met during this trip -- where they might be in five or ten years. Some of them might make it big and, as they assured me, use their success and fame to give back to their town and build a better life for their family and friends. Others will not achieve either fame or success but will just keep creating, putting out their music into the vast expanse of their Internet. Their music will always be, as one man told me, “a local memory” -- how long until it fades? How will it show up in the future music of Clinton? Will its ghost remain, just as we can still hear the ghosts of the blues and gospel?

I wonder where the South will be, too. As I wandered among old postbellum manors in Clinton on my final day working in the field on the project, I met a man – on the morning of Mardi Gras, overcast skies overhead -- and he invited me into his home for grits. I began

speaking to him about the project, about the South. The man, who was white, told me about his family. His ancestors had been plantation owners, and they lost everything at the end of the Civil War but stayed around the town. “Inertia,” the man said, kept him personally in Clinton. He commenced something of a reckoning, quoting William Faulkner, wrestling with his own family history, shedding tears as the gray morning light came into his sitting room, contemplating how glacial the process of change can be. “I was, I think, pretty indifferent to suffering,” he said, talking about the history of the South, race relations, and his experience in the town. “I shouldn’t have been. It was all around me. But it just didn’t register with me. All I had to do was see it.”

vi. Biography

Graham Dickie was born in Falls Church, Virginia in February 1995 and bred in Austin, Texas. While at UT, he studied journalism concurrent with Plan II. During college he focused on multimedia storytelling, gaining professional experience in audio, video, and photographic production. He worked at a public radio station, a film studio, and a non-profit in Maputo, Mozambique, where he trained deaf journalists and produced documentaries about them.

Early hip-hop memories include finding copies of Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* and Beastie Boys albums in his father's CD collection and listening to DJ Screw as he rode in the passenger seat of his brother's car on the way to high school every morning.